



# Manhattan, or the Steps of an Improbable Identity

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# **Manhattan, or the Steps of an Improbable Identity**

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Along the past two centuries, while a certain identity of Latin-American poetry was in construction, then claimed its place, exported, and inscribed its tradition in contemporary lyrics, New York has undeniably occupied a prominent position. Contemporary Latin American poetry sometimes makes its way towards its northern counterpart. The present essay is a first attempt at examining what happens at the contact point between the two poetic traditions, especially when Manhattan is at the center of the poem<sup>1</sup>.

While this article will refer to many poets in whose creation New York was an important step, the analysis will focus on three Andean poets whose voices have marked the Latin-American lyrics over the past half-century: Peruvian poetess Blanca Varela (Lima, 1926-2009), Chilean poet Enrique Lihn (Santiago de Chili, 1929-1988), and Bolivian poet Eduardo Mitre (Oruro, 1943). All three are acknowledged well beyond the borders of their motherlands and all three are among the leaders of contemporary poetry in Spanish. Significantly, passing through Manhattan was a decisive step in their work, whether they defined a new poetic line or gave theirs a new dimension there.

This essay will not examine whole collections but will analyze poems that represent, in the biographies of the three poets, significant steps in a cosmopolitan journey. The poems are respectively Varela's "Valzes," the long opening poem of *Valses y otras falsas*

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<sup>1</sup> I want to address a special thanks to Nathalie Dessens for sharing this adventure and for translating my essay.

*confesiones* (1971), several poems extracted from Lihn's *A partir de Manhattan* (1979) and *Pena de extrañamiento* (1986), and Mitre's complete collection *El paraguas de Manhattan* (2004). These texts, spread over four decades, constitute, in successive touches, poetic and plastic perceptions of New York, and they represent part of the contemporaneous imaginary of the Latin-American "voyage."

The present essay will follow the poets' walk in the city, which sometimes takes the form of a loss in the labyrinth and sometimes that of the new consciousness of a foreignness or strangeness, when the urban landscape by antonomasia, Manhattan, affected both by gravity and grace, metamorphoses into a space questioning the poetic making.

## 1- Antecedents

These poets do not belong to the generation of Latin-American poets who integrated the English language in their verse, thus creating a true linguistic intersection. When English is present in the three authors' works, it is limited to the paratext of the poetic sections, in the form of homage quotes, titles, or English words in italic. There is no fusion between the two languages, no Spanglish, but, instead, a sort of highlighting of both languages.

Moreover, without reminding, in an exhaustive way, how fructuous, poetically speaking, was the clash with New York for Spanish language poetry, it is impossible not to cite the texts by José Martí, a contemporary of Walt Whitman, written from New York, between 1880 and 1895, as well as the famous "Aquí los hombres no mueren, sino que se derrumban: no son organismos que se desgastan, sino Ícaros que caen".<sup>2</sup> José Martí—who introduced Whitman's poetry into the Spanish-speaking world (with Rubén Darío)—, was also one of the first poets who introduced the New York landscape into Latin-American

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<sup>2</sup> Martí, 1535.

poetry and prose. Two founding titles, which stand out on the Hispanic side, should also be added: *Diario de un poeta recién casado* (1916) by Juan Ramón Jiménez, and *Poeta en Nueva York* (1929-1930, published in 1940) by Federico García Lorca. Here again, Whitman's destiny is linked to New York's. Here again, encounters were fertile.

## 2- A Poetry under Influence (Varela)

When Blanca Varela, the poet from Lima, arrived in New York in the late 1950s, after sojourning in Paris and Florence, she was permeated with painting, in particular contemporary and Renaissance art. Those years with her husband, the painter Fernando de Szyszlo, shaped in her a vision where painting and sculpture started a real dialogue with poetic writing. With New York, the urban theme found a new place in her verse and, thanks to the Lima counterpoint operated in her poem "Vales", and the city became a place of encounter between her subjectivity and an unheard-of spatial construction.

"Vales" is composed of three threads that weave in turn, in verse or in prose, a digest of life: if the poem starts and ends with the passionate evocation of Lima, quotes from Peruvian sentimental songs (the famous "Vales") intersperse the fragments in prose that evoke New York. The device—poem in prose—is used to make the reader follow the poet's (Mrs Szyszlo, in the poem) meandering on a snowy Sunday morning, while discovering at the same time a scene of the daily urban life in the vicinity of Washington Square and extremely elaborate poetic thoughts on the traps of representation, all under the protection of a poetics in which it is easy to recognize the resort to conversational poetry imported from the Anglophone tradition.

New York is then Blanca Varela's daily environment but her field of vision seems perpetually influenced by art and it apparently perpetually questions reality and appearances.

Había un sol débil sobre Washington Square, muy débil. Los árboles parecían alambres retorcidos y luego estirados a la fuerza; como si los hubieran puesto entre dos vidrios amarillos. Desde lejos me hacían pensar en delicadas columnas vertebrales de insectos. Bonita casa: huesos de insectos. El bar que había frente a casa estaba cerrado con un inmenso candado negro. Me di cuenta de que era domingo.

[...]

Esperé que cambiara la luz. Ningún auto venía. Sólo un ciclista pasó cantando muy fuerte, con voz de tenor. Tenía anteojos, una bufanda roja que flotaba, y la voz salía como humo de su boca. La escuché hasta que se perdió, cada vez más delgada y clara, en la larga y estrecha calle de depósitos clausurados.

La última palabra que escuché fue corazón. Era una canción de Frank Sinatra.

La plaza continuaba desierta. Miento. Muy lejos, casi junto al arco, exactamente entre la fuente y el arco, caminaba un ciego. Me di cuenta de que era ciego porque llevaba un bastón blanco y tenía el aire de no ir a ninguna parte. Me puse los anteojos para ver bien al ciego. No me había equivocado, estaba dando vueltas alrededor de la fuente.

[...]

Crucé la calle y sentí que el cielo era más oscuro a mi derecha. A ese lado las torres más altas de Wall Street parecían dibujadas con carbón, en un solo plano gris lavado con delicadas manchas amarillas y rosas. Cuestión de óptica, parecían un decorado de teatro.

Sabía que estaban muy lejos y, sin embargo, me parecía también que se inclinaban peligrosamente sobre mi cabeza.

Las puertas de vidrio giraron y reflejaron todo: la plaza, el sol débil, las torres, el bar cerrado, el semáforo.

—Good morning Mrs. Szyszlo.

—Buenos días Joe.

—Nice weather!

—Sí, Joe. Es un lindo día... (p. 109-114).

Each fragment contains aesthetic thoughts oscillating between painting and architecture, all fraught with classical reminiscences. The places evoked (the Manhattan towers, Washington Square) strengthen this construction of a landscape painted with watercolor tinges. The “cuestión de óptica” of the last quoted fragment tips up the perception of space: New York absorbs and recomposes the data of the ideal city of the 16<sup>th</sup> century in Italy, of the city as a theatrical set. It is unnecessary to dwell on the impressively long list of

coincidences between texts written at the time and this contemporary vision of the urban.<sup>3</sup> What is significant is that the questionings bear on the questions of point of view, perspective, and trompe-l'oeil.

After the initial New York context issuing from the mental stereotyped vision (a suicide, police car sirens, a black beggar, young people performing jazz in the street), appears an aestheticizing vision. Yet, whatever the setting, the art of representation is present, powerful, caught up in the net of the tradition of prose poetry and its connections with the urban pictorial landscape. An entirely dramatized scene, Blanca Varela's walk leads her from show to show, the macabre show of suicide, the joyful show of the jazz band, or the reference to Frank Sinatra, up to the very last impression left by a real *mise en abyme* of the set: "Las puertas de vidrio giraron y reflejaron todo: la plaza, el sol débil, las torres, el bar cerrado, el semáforo".

The whole New York space becomes some kind of aesthetic delusion, the result of a permanent interstice where reality seems to be framed by representation, while maintaining the gap in which the beholder is, an interstice underlying the essential gap which founds the poetic image, digging it here from the pictorial one; one that sets, from the beginning of her poetic work, the main lines of the Varelian poetry, always on the watch when the relationship between truth and lie is concerned. Taken as we are in a world of reflections, the poet questions for us this vertiginous space, maybe reinforcing the oxymoron of the title of the collection from which this poem is excerpted: *Valses y otras falsas confesiones*.

### 3- Celebration and Chaos (Mitre)

If there is a vertiginous poetic play on space in Blanca Varela's verse, her language does not have the playful character of Eduardo Mitre's. And even if several poems of *El*

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<sup>3</sup> For more details on this, see Suárez.

*paraguas de Manhattan* are dedicated to painters (Edward Hopper, Mark Rothko, or Pollock, sometimes more anecdotally than in Varela and Lihn), the relationship with New York is first verbal. And the “tríptico de sílabas” of the word Manhattan progressively metamorphoses to the point of exulting:

Lo deletreo, lo palabreo,

lo unto con mi saliva:

ya coitus linguae:

Manhattan,

Manwoman,

Manwhitman. (p. 21-22)

Caught in the seduction of Whitman, the two-faced Manhattan poet, as Eric Athenot calls him,<sup>4</sup> Mitre could be said to side with exhilaration. Indeed, as when reading some of Whitman’s poems, we are caught in the charm of an exuberant enthusiasm.

Also placed under the aegis of Lautréamont, evoked in the umbrella of the title (the same umbrella mentioned in “Beau comme la rencontre fortuite d’un parapluie et d’une machine à coudre sur une table de dissection,” and thus of the defender of a beauty that sometimes owes its creation to chance,<sup>5</sup> Eduardo Mitre willingly adopts this aesthetic of surprise and ambulates in New York, open to encounter. Literary encounters because New York seems to constitute, in Mitre’s verse, a teeming palimpsest of authors and artists, but also “merely” human encounters, when the poet rubs shoulder with this third-class homeland (“patria de tercera”) claimed by Nicaraguan poet Pablo Antonio Cuadra and which, in the present case, is the one that peoples the underground.

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<sup>4</sup> Athenot, 141.

<sup>5</sup> A quotation of the paratext of *El paraguas de Manhattan* explicitly evokes the short-story “Memorias de un paraguas” by Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, which also questions destiny.

The underground is celebrated as this space where solidarity still exists, where dignity can recover a human expression. There is no sentimentalism (Varela also banishes it from her poetry), but a loving look cast on people and things and, before all, on the city. This is confirmed by the title of the first poem, “Ciudad a primera vista,” modeled on the Spanish expression meaning “love at first sight,” “Amor a primera vista.” The couplets which follow each other in pairs recreate the sensation/sensuality pair transmitted by the eye of the poetic I which literally embraces the urban geography:

Dos ríos como dos brazos  
que la ciñen y estrechan.

What is highlighted is the celebration of the encounter and, here, of the vision, in the fashion of Baudelaire or Whitman, even if the women passing by are “extrême-contemporaines”<sup>6</sup>:

Morenas, caribes por el acento,  
[...] //  
Regias piernas la de la diestra,  
senos firmes la del centro,  
cejas traviesas la tercera.  
[...] //  
Desfallecientes, doblaron la esquina  
y siguieron a trechos, en trance,  
sin poder apearce  
del carruaje sin cochero de la risa. (p. 29)

The poetic page welcomes and protects those photographic snapshots, whether to save the sycamores or count the participants to a marathon. It welcomes, nostalgically, a nature that is as removed as this “cielo del Altiplano”:

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<sup>6</sup> Periodization instituted by French literary criticism and referring to the latest literary writing.



colmado de astros  
-aquí solo visibles  
con los ojos cerrados de la nostalgia. (p. 45)

Furthermore, bearing signs of the stranger and his grief, the lyrical voice of *El paraguas de Manhattan* cannot but be marked by the stigmata of 9-11. All seven poems acknowledge it and the titles of the first three (“La llaga”, “Lamento”, “Duelo”) leave no doubt that they refer to the attacks against the Twin Towers. As with many Latin Americans, however, the poetic voice establishes links with other departed people, other 9-11s, in other countries of the Western Hemisphere, in a communion of grief going from North to South.

The poetic voice of *El paraguas de Manhattan* unceasingly draws us to the Manhattan that Antonio Muñoz Molina defined as “la enciclopedia máxima del mundo.”<sup>7</sup> Close to prose by its use of the language of daily life, and despite the clear highlighting of the Hispanic poetic forms of brief verse and brief stanzas, the poems follow a verticality that plays on the mimesis with the slender shape of the skyscrapers. The new passer-by, who is silhouetted poem after poem, audacious like a modern Argonaut who reveals to him the poetic voice, allies lightness and ponderousness to narrate, in the end, in the epic mode, the metamorphoses of an umbrella, his umbrella: “[...] enciendo / la máquina de coser palabras // y costuro la lluvia que cae / afuera y en la pantalla / mientras lentamente se abre // el paraguas de Lautréamont” (p. 99). The rain is the medium which unified humans and gods and which makes possible the always renewed miracle of the poetic voice.

#### 4- Underground (Lihn)

Paradoxically, as we just saw, Eduardo Mitre’s umbrella does not prevent him from being solar, in spite of all, in this Manhattan which, seen by Enrique Lihn, becomes the

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<sup>7</sup> Prologue of *El Paraguas de Manhattan*, 12.

Manhattan of the underground, closer to the dregs than to the corridors of the underground which haunt this poetry. A same fascination, however, unites the three poets. Lihn explains: “Me dejo atar, fascinado por ella / a los recuerdos del presente” (*Pena de extrañamiento*, p. 295).

Indeed, the megalopolis, visited by the Chilean in 1978, can briefly suggest an encounter, almost a happy reunion, when the poet feels such a strong intimacy that he seems to acknowledge as his these “Antepasados instantaneos” on yellowed photographs at a secondhand bookseller’s, “[...] como si Manhattan « [...] / fuera mi ciudad natal y yo el hijo de esos antiguos vecinos” (p. 295).

This is, however, a misconception and the urban space soon becomes the infernal scenario that welcomes a poetic figure stigmatized by an unknown language in that well-read (hyper-read) city:

Escrita para otros  
la ciudad con sus mendigos imperiosos  
y yo el analfabeto  
(los hados me caparon del inglés al nacer) (APM, p. 20)

The image of the beggar as characteristic of the poetic voice is frequent in Lihn’s poetry and should thus not surprise the reader. Yet, the approach is here marked by the darkness of the pictorial references. The underground, in several poems, become the place *par excellence* of this decomposition. The nun of “Monja en el subway,” “llama fría en un vaso de escarcha” (p.16) is totally incapable of reviving the mystic flame long engulfed, not even in this “Catedral neoyorquina”: “gran sucursal del cielo en Nueva York” (p. 55). The human groups are animalized, as those old people of “St John The Divine”: “Todo el peso de Dios [...] / para que suban / al vacío del cielo los viejos en rebaño” (p. 57). The underground is

threatened by « la irrupción de quién sabe qué horda » (p. 34) in this car “cargado de presos que huyeran al asalto de los túneles.” The underground is, indeed, the perfect place for such phantasmagorias, with its “millones de rostros planctónicos” (p. 18). Goyesque images are thus created when an old woman is evoked in the underground: “La piel ya es de trapo y empaqueta la carne / desmigajada como si fuera estopa o aserrín” (p. 19).

The experience of decline accentuates when the lyrical voice opens a series of thoughts in which the pictorial and the poetical seem to vie with each other to be the most abject. To understand this sequence, which does not follow Blanca Varela’s path but adopts a similar logic, it is probably useful to come back to Lihn’s aphoristic line in *Pena de extrañamiento*: “el placer del ojo en el paraíso de la visión artificial” (p. 297). For New York also enables Lihn, many times, to question in depth the theme of look, view, and vision from this spectacular and specular place, as in the evocation of one of Bacon’s paintings “Lying figure with hypodermic syringe” (p. 27). Or as in “Water Lilies, 1920,” paintings by Claude Monet, all cited in their English titles, some of which were exhibited at the New York Museum of Modern Art: “Un cielo especular / es todo lo que se ve en el agua / invisible que lo refleja” (p. 26). It seems that Lihn’s main interest is with this reflection in Monet’s painting. A garden like an “Arca de la Alianza / entre lo invisible y lo visible / La naturaleza y la pintura se hacen entre sí signos de equivalencia” (p. 30). A reflection whose beginning could never be seen, not unlike the sky, invisible between the New York buildings, reflected by the thousands of Argos’s eyes (the image originating from Eduardo Mitre’s *El paraguas de Manhattan* (p. 96)).

A non-symmetrical play of echoes for these thoughts on the pictorial making and the poetical writing opposes two monsters of pictorial art: Monet and Bacon. Between them, a poem “Nada que ver en la mirada” (p. 24), in which the poet, once a clairvoyant, becomes a voyeur:

Un mundo de voyeurs sabe que la mirada  
es sólo un escenario  
donde el espectador se mira en sus fantasmas

And this eventually bares reality, to some extent. It reveals a crudeness of colors and language; a violence of representation which seems to have no equivalent but this monster-city. The most striking example sends us back to some kind of wild ekphrasis of Bacon's portrait of Isabel Rawsthorne, in a street of Soho:

Pienso en Isabel Rawsthorne para exorcizar la asfíxia  
de la que ella, en una calle del Soho, es un emblema aproximativo  
con su carne eyaculada por el pincel de Francis Bacon. (p. 14)

It is necessary here to return to an already-quoted line “(el placer del ojo en el paraíso de la visión artificial)” and, considering it as a fragment of poetical art, to deconstruct several of its meanings to understand that the fascination felt is partly created by artificial paradises (painted by Bacon). The pleasure of the eye also sends back to voyeurism (painted by Degas) and the “paraíso”, the paradise of the quotation, becomes, by paronomasia, at the end of the same poem from “Pena de extrañamiento”, the parasite, “parasite”, a poetic figure condemned to return to living in one of those “medio ciudades, defectuosas copias de Manhattan” (p. 299). The dice are forever loaded.

##### 5- New York: Meta-Poetical and Meta-Discursive by Antonomasia

The logical conclusion after these few poems, born of a (more or less) long passage by Manhattan, is probably related to New York's living theatrical stage. The city constantly stages itself, either through clichés or through less glamorous aspects which all send the authors studied in this essay back to their own writing practice. What is remarkable is certainly that the palimpsest is not only textual but also pictorial in Varela, Mitre, and Lihn.

Art seems to be the foundation of the questioning of the city's identity as it is the foundation of their own poetry, an art which permanently questions the subtle border which marks its separation from the artifice or the artificial. At the same time, this questioning sends them back to the limits of their own poetics, beautifully expressed by these lines written by Enrique Lihn, where the song of the eraser becomes a writing tool, erasing its own trace in the same movement as it inscribes it:

Estas líneas fueron escritas  
con el canto de la goma de borrar<sup>8</sup>

This is the gesture of some kind of Sisyphus, so often present in the contemporary identities of Latin-American poetry.

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> I want to address a special thanks to Nathalie Dessens for sharing this adventure and for translating my essay.

<sup>2</sup> Martí, 1535.

<sup>3</sup> For more details on this, see Suárez.

<sup>4</sup> Athenot, 141.

<sup>5</sup> A quotation of the paratext of *El paraguas de Manhattan* explicitly evokes the short-story "Memorias de un paraguas" by Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, which also questions destiny.

<sup>6</sup> Periodization instituted by French literary criticism and referring to the latest literary writing.

<sup>7</sup> Prologue of *El Paraguas de Manhattan*, 12.

<sup>8</sup> *Pena de extrañamiento*, 294.

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<sup>8</sup> Enrique Lihn, *Pena de extrañamiento*, 294.

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